



## **Research Brief: Voices of Black People with Disabilities and Their Rights under the ADA**

### **Background and Purpose**

Nearly 35 years after the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), significant economic and social disparities for individuals with disabilities remain profound, with these disparities being most pronounced among Black persons with disabilities. Employment rates for this population hover around 25%, and the poverty rate is 37%, among the highest of all racial groups (Goodman, Morris & Boston, 2019). These data suggest that the ADA has not had the desired impact on Black individuals with disabilities. In this context, this research brief presents the findings of a qualitative study aimed at identifying the unique barriers encountered by Black individuals with disabilities in accessing and exercising their rights under the ADA, along with the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges.

### **Study Methods and Participants**

The Mid-Atlantic ADA Center conducted four virtual focus groups with a total of 50 Black/African American adults (women – 57%; men – 33%) with diverse disabilities. Participants engaged in one-hour facilitated sessions that elicited their knowledge, perspectives, and recommendations regarding their life experiences, and their understanding and assertion of rights under the ADA.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) was used to analyze the focus group transcripts using Nvivo-14 qualitative analysis software. Two researchers conducted initial coding and analysis, and a third team member who is Black and has a disability reviewed, audited, and shaped this brief.

### **Findings**

The analysis generated seven central themes related to accessing disability rights and benefits under the ADA:

1. Understanding and Accessing Rights under the ADA
2. Sources of Information about the ADA
3. Intersectional Identity Struggles and Belonging
4. Inadequate Disability Resources and Supports
5. Discrimination and Marginalization
6. Continued Advocacy to Achieve Justice and Empowerment under the Law
7. Accessing Disability Supports and Accommodation

Each major theme is detailed below, accompanied by direct participant quotes that illustrate the lived experiences of the focus group participants.

### **Theme 1: Understanding and Accessing Rights under the ADA**

Participants described their understanding of ADA rights, emphasizing the importance of disability inclusion, the integration of disability rights with civil rights, and their desire for improved awareness and understanding of their rights under the law. One participant explained:

*“The ADA allows people with disabilities to have the same rights as non-disabled people...it covers basic living, employment, and access to services.”*

The overlap in their understanding of disability and civil rights is highlighted in this quotation:

*“It’s not something actually separate from basic civil rights. It causes an inclusion. It brought forth an inclusion of the disabled community into basic civil rights for people.”*

### **Theme 2: Sources of Information about the ADA and Disability Rights**

Participants identified multiple ways of accessing ADA information, including self-education, joining national associations and organizations, and using their social networks. As one participant stated:

*“You just have to be educated and read a lot about your rights ... we have to educate ourselves.”*

Another member highlighted the importance of joining national organizations this way:

*“If it wasn’t for the National Federation of the Blind and their advocacy, who knows where we would get our information from in terms of blindness, because when I lost my eyesight, the ADA law was already in effect, but if you didn’t have no information about where to go just to get resources to deal with your disability, you can’t jump right into the ADA laws.”*

### **Theme 3: Intersectional Identity Struggles**

This theme captured the complex identity struggles faced by Black individuals with disabilities, focusing on the challenge of navigating multiple marginalized identities, as well as the ultimate desire for social inclusion. A participant emphasized:

*“I want people to see me for who I am – not just a blind lady that lives across the street.”*

Another brought up the intersectionality struggle and salience of disability this way:

*“But like I say, I feel as a disabled person, I’m my own race. I’m not black or white. It’s just my race is disabled.”*

Another shared about experiencing micro-aggressions related to their disabilities:

*“Years ago when I had to collect unemployment, I went to unemployment, and I had my sister with me. Well, the person behind the desk says, can you tell her that she needs to come back in two weeks? And I said, excuse me, I can hear. I’m blind, I’m not deaf. My sister said here, she can hear. Why don’t you talk to her?”*

#### **Theme 4: Discrimination and Marginalization**

The intersection of racism and ableism, compounded by other social factors, such as age, gender, and poverty, was another important theme. Participants shared experiences of discrimination in various settings, including employment, healthcare, and education. One woman who faced discrimination based on her intersecting identities described it this way:

*“So, as a woman with my disability and color, you know...three of the most marginalized groups, which one shows up first. But as I rolled into that [classroom] does my race show up, being a woman show up, [or]my disability. Which one of those discriminations do I have to deal with?”*

Adding other social factors can compound discriminatory experiences, as this participant stated:

*“OK, we have our racial disparities, if we have a disability to go along with that, that makes it tenfold to me, and if you’re dealing with the fact that economically we’re struggling, you’re dealing with all of them at the same time in trying to access services.”*

#### **Theme 5: Restricted Access to Disability Services and Supports**

Despite the ADA’s mandates, many participants reported barriers in accessing necessary services, and pointed to accommodations that were inadequate or lacking altogether, insufficient resources and funding, and limited information about how to access resources. For example, this participant elaborated on requesting but not receiving adequate academic accommodations:

*“I asked for a sign language interpreter or real-time captions during college lectures. My request was denied by the school, who said they did not have the budget to provide these accommodations. I felt terrible”*

Another emphasized the impact of racism when it came to accessing critical information:

*“Sometimes, because of the color of your skin, you don’t get information readily. And for some reason, Black people got to push more and more to get access ... because the next person, our other-color counterparts, they get the information.”*

### **Theme 6: Continued Advocacy for Justice and Empowerment**

Participants discussed their ongoing efforts to advocate for disability rights, both individually and collectively, several describing it as a “continuous fight to advocate for our rights.” Another elaborated on the need to collectively struggle this way:

*“I think we get to sit at the table when we show up like now, when we show up and we share the different experiences and keep fighting. And you know what ya’ll? Being disabled, it is a fight.”*

Another shared their personal experience advocating for an accommodation:

*“An example of a situation I had to advocate for myself was when I advocated for the right to have interpreters at my doctor’s appointment since I have a hearing disability. Lucky for me, I had an interpreter in my next appointment.”*

Disability acceptance was also an issue within Black communities, as explained by this participant:

*“In the African American community, we need to normalize disability and make it more visible. You know, with African Americans, it’s kind of taboo. It’s kind of secret. So as far as just going forward with visibility and normalizing things, we need to do a better job.”*

### **Theme 7: Accessing Disability Supports and Accommodations**

Participants also shared positive experiences regarding the supports they received, ranging from family assistance to publicly provided services and accommodations. Demanding and receiving critical accommodations in public accommodations is highlighted by this participant:

*“There’s certain theaters in Boston that has special seating accommodation for those in electric chairs and wheelchairs, but those with vision impaired, they put them in the aisle that’s raised up so -- the vision is better ... it’s really awesome, because we worked so hard while I was a lobbyist to get these things done.”*

### **Recommendations**

This qualitative study highlights the persistent struggles faced by Black individuals with disabilities in accessing and utilizing their rights under the ADA. It also underscores the need for targeted outreach to this population, including effective methods and messages for education about disability rights, and relevant, feasible, useful and accessible strategies to achieve it. Recommendations include:

- **Enhance ADA education and outreach within the Black community.** Implementing community-based educational/informational programs tailored to address cultural nuances can raise awareness about ADA rights among Black individuals to ensure better engagement and understanding.
- **Investigate the impact of systemic racism on ADA implementation.** Further studies are needed to understand how systemic racism affects the enforcement of the ADA for Black communities. Such research can inform policies that ensure equitable application of disability rights across diverse groups.
- **Examine existing social support networks.** Research can explore how social support systems, including online communities, impact the ability of Black individuals with disabilities to advocate for themselves and access necessary resources. Understanding the dynamics can guide the development of supportive infrastructures and leverage existing supports.
- **Foster community engagement and advocacy.** Support participation and make visible the value of belonging to advocacy groups and community organizations to enable Black individuals with disabilities to voice their concerns and build strong networks that can lead to collective action and systemic reform.

## References

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